

SOVIET LIFE AT WORK

DEMOCRACY

The People
and Land of
BIROBIDZHAN

Vyacheslav KOSTIKOV

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The People and Land of BIROBIDZHAN

The Jewish Autonomous Region



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A NEW HOME

The plane Moscow-Khabarovsk-Birobidzhan carries me off towards the sun. It will already be tomorrow when, in eight hours' time, I walk down the steps in Birobidzhan, the main city in the Jewish Autonomous Region. Meanwhile, the plane is approaching the place on the fifty-second latitude where, less than half a century ago, a new town appeared, named after the two tributaries of the Amur, the Bira and Bidzhan.

... At the end of the 20's it took weeks to travel by rail from the southern regions of the European USSR to the Far East. The trains were filled with Jewish migrants. What induced them to leave the places they had lived in for years?

The Jewish population suffered discrimination in tsarist Russia. During the XV-XVIII centuries the authorities had the right to force Jews to quit their place of residence at any time. In the XIX century the "Jewish Pale" was established and Jews were

forbidden to settle outside its limits. Within the "Jewish Pale" (the southern and south-western fringes of the Russian Empire), they were neither permitted to own land nor to live in rural areas and in certain cities.

The Revolution of October 1917 abolished exploitation of man by man and eliminated all restrictions concerning choice of residence or occupation. After the nationalisation of land and the adoption of the "Declaration of Rights of the Peoples of Russia" (1917), proclaiming "the total abolition of all privileges and restrictions of a national or religious nature", the Jews were granted equal rights and freedoms with all the others. Many Jewish families expressed the wish to work on the land and to form agricultural cooperatives... For this they needed land. The fact was, however, that the tsarist government had intentionally granted the Jews the right to permanent residence in regions with a high density of both urban and rural population, where there was very little development land. After the Revolution only a part of the Jewish community could be resettled in the areas of the Crimea and the Ukraine obtained for them by the Soviet government and the Committee for the Organization of Land for Jewish Workers. The number of Jews wishing to work in agriculture was, however, significantly greater.

The Committee for the Organization of Land for Jewish Workers looked to eastern Russia. There was more than enough land to be developed there, but it was necessary to find areas suitable for habitation and agriculture. The resolution "On the allocation of development land in the region of the Amur river in the Far East territory for the mass settle-

ment and use by Jewish workers", taken in March 1928 by the highest organ of government at the time, the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee (CEC), described the chosen region as that lying "along the Amur river, running west of Khabarovsk to the mouth of the Hingan river and along the Hingan to the railroad, and to the north of the railroad extending eastwards to the river Urmi, and further eastwards along the Urmi, Tunguska and a line west of Khabarovsk".

The wealth of nature and the diversity of animal and plant life in the region still exist today despite the active development by the settlers. No one in the villages, settlements or towns of the Jewish Autonomous Region is surprised to see a huntsman return with a dozen ducks, a wild boar or an elk (the shooting of elks is permitted only under licence). According to the collective farmers, it is not uncommon to see a bear near the beehives beyond the farm limits. The Ussuri tiger is found in wild parts of the Siberian forest. Only a few hours drive from Birobidzhan, you can see in the forests Siberian stag, musk-deer, roe, foxes, squirrels, pheasants, wild geese and many other types of game.

The wealth of the rivers is considerable. The famous Far East salmon and grayling are among some of the most valuable species found here. Amateur huntsmen in the area told me that almost half the population hunt or fish (or, more often, do both).

The fruits of nature are so abundant that it would take a whole book to enumerate all the wildlife of the forests, rivers, mountains and lakes in this territory of the Soviet Far East. I will simply add that both the lotus flower and the celebrated "root of life"—ginseng—grow in the Jewish Autonomous

Region. Today, the people living there are aware of all these riches. For the first migrants, however, the place was a "terra incognita".

Naum Korchminsky, the chief editor of the local Jewish paper, the *Birobidzhaner Stern* (printed in Yiddish), and an expert on the Region's history told me, "The Jews are cautious people, but in those far-off days the desire to settle their own land was so great that many families left where they had been living for years and set out without waiting for instructions circulated by the Committee for the Organization of Land for Jewish Workers."

Some families settled along the Trans-Siberian railroad, while others went to plains and rivers where Russian villages were already established and founded new settlements there. The city of Birobidzhan, the present administrative and industrial centre of the Region, developed on the site of the small station Tikhonkaya. The town of Obluchye and large villages like Valdheim and Amurzet grew up.

By 1930, there were already 12,000 Jews living in the region lying between the two rivers the Bira and the Bidzhan, with a territory exceeding that of Belgium (36,000 square kilometres). The Russian and Ukrainian population also increased rapidly. By 1934, the newly-settled region had achieved such a high level of agricultural and administrative independence that it was decided to grant it autonomy. The new status gave it the name "the Jewish Autonomous Region". Speaking on this occasion, Mikhail Kalinin, Chairman of the CEC Presidium, said, "The government's decision to transform the Biro-Bidzhan region of the Far East territory into the independent Jewish Autonomous Region was not made just for show. The transformation of the Biro-Bidzhan re-

gion into an independent area is of great economic significance for the as yet totally undeveloped territory which possesses large deposits of ore, a massive area of forests and a wealth of resources, including gold."

The Autonomous Region has been in existence since May 1934, when the rights of the Jews to national self-determination and to their own state organization within the federation were realized.

The Jewish poetess, Lyubov Vasserman, wrote many beautiful poems about Birobidzhan,

"And I said to myself,
Enough of this wandering,
I have reached my goal.
Look, there is my home."

The Jewish Autonomous Region became the Jewish migrants' home.

Word of the natural bounty of these Far East territories spread quickly among the Jewish families. The first settlers wrote that watermelons ripen well in the favourable conditions created by the sunshine and summer monsoon rains and that grapes grow wild in the forests. The migrants no longer came in two's and three's, but by the trainload, bringing their belongings, cattle and tools with them. They were followed by the trains carrying supplies of machinery, building materials, clothing, kerosine and food sent by the workers of Odessa, Moscow, Khar'kov, Kiev, Vitebsk and other cities to help the settlers. The whole country helped the new area to establish itself.

Before 1928, the population of the railway station Tikhonkaya was only six hundred, one small flour mill being the sole sign of "industrialization". It

was a natural economy there, people living as they had done for centuries: some had small vegetable plots, but most lived by hunting and fishing. It was fortunate that the river Bira held a score or so different species of fish. Today the river is still particularly rich in Siberian salmon which come in hundreds of thousands to spawn. Traditional trades, however, fairly soon took second place. Wood-sawing plants, at first small and primitive, sprang up along the river.

The population grew rapidly, settlements were founded, collective farms were organized and schools were built. The first group of Jewish migrants arrived at Tikhonkaya on 28th April 1928, just one month after the government's resolution allocating the territory. The group of settlers in which Leib Gefen travelled arrived after a three-week journey by train. They explored their new surroundings, built the first houses and sat down to write to their wives whom they had temporarily left behind. Abram Rubinchik's letter reached his wife in distant Vitebsk, at the other end of the Soviet land. He wrote: "You can't imagine how strikingly beautiful the countryside is, Khaenka... Start to get things packed up and I'll expect you here by the autumn..."

In September, the wives of the first five settlers set off with their twenty-two children. The settlement of the new land had begun. Leib Gefen, the head of the first group, met his sister Mira and his younger brother Vladimir. Today Mira is seventy-six. When she reminisces about those distant years she likes to describe how her brother led them into the new house, the very first home of their own.

"The wood was still pale and there was a smell of resin inside.

"Well, this is our house. This is where we're going to live now," my brother said. "Do you know what we've called our settlement? Valdgeim." (Translated from the Yiddish, this means "forest home"—*Author*).

In 1929, several settlers and their families organized an agricultural cooperative—a collective farm—and called it after the village.

... Today, the Gefens' house still stands in the middle of the village. The old house is built of massive, darkened timbers, the planks of the pediments are still strong although dried-up and weather-beaten.

Of course, not all settled for good. Some were frightened off by the fairly frosty (though very sunny and dry) winters and left after a couple of years. Nevertheless, the majority stayed and, after a time, when they had become accustomed to life there, they began to write to their relations and friends, inviting them to the Far East.

Yet another of the oldest inhabitants of the village, Ikhil Rak, set out for the East in answer to such a letter.

In 1932, his brother-in-law, who had come to those parts some time earlier, wrote, "... So, my dear, don't spend long in thinking things over, sell your horse with all the trimmings, and come over to build a new life. If you want to till the soil—we have plenty of land; if you want to continue working as a carter—then we have horses here too. In brief, dear Ikhil, you know your brother-in-law Nakhmanberg, you know he doesn't say things unless he means them. Think it over and I wish you a happy journey."

The carter from the small town of Berdichev in the Ukraine considered the suggestion, sold his

horse, took leave of his relations and set off with his wife and small children.

At first Ikhil worked as a lumberjack, and told only his wife Khaja about his dream: he wanted to drive a tractor. But even he felt this was quite unrealistic! The country was only just beginning to manufacture tractors and, even in central Russia, they were still a rarity. But the rest of the country gave as much help as possible to the Jewish collective farms which were growing up in the taiga. In 1933, two tractors appeared in Valdgeim.

Rozenpud and Zintaikh were the first collective farmers to drive tractors. Tractors, seeding-machines and harvesters continued to arrive, and Ikhil Rak entered the first tractor operator training school in the region when it opened in Birobidzhan. Six months later he returned to the farm and was given a tractor to drive.

Possibly because Ikhil himself was scarcely literate (he left school before he was twelve), it was his lifelong dream to give his children an education. All Ikhil's four sons obeyed their father's wishes and studied.

The eldest son, Aron, first drove a tractor as his father had done, then finished agricultural institute in Blagoveshchensk and is now the farm's chief economist. The second son, Yefim, finished his ten years of schooling the year his father died. The collective farm gave him a grant and sent him to study as a veterinary surgeon. Now he looks after the farm's herd (3,600 head of cattle).

Ikhil's third son, Boris, drove a tractor for over ten years. He then became the farm mechanic, studied, got a higher education and became the chief engineer at Valdgeim. Since 1974, he has been vice-

chairman—the second most important person on the farm.

The youngest son, David, chose a rather different path. He was not attracted by agricultural work and entered the building trade.

Even today the old people of the town like to recall an incident connected with Ikhil Rak's family. The Second World War (1939-45) showed no mercy to the Jews living in Europe. Hundreds of thousands of Jews were also killed by German troops on occupied Soviet territory. Although the Jewish settlers in the Far East did not suffer all the horrors and humiliations of the invasion, the breath of war could be felt even there, seven thousand kilometres from the Soviet Union's western border. Many men volunteered for the front, and not all of them returned. On the memorial to the soldiers from the village of Valdgeim who fell in the war, the names of Jews can be seen alongside those of Russians and Ukrainians: Izya Pechersky, Meer Khazan, Gersh Dakh, Yakov Guralnik, Gersh Rashberg... The people who remained so far from the front did not want to be left out of the struggle the whole Soviet people were waging against fascism. Several war planes were built with voluntary contributions made by the collective farmers, who also collected parcels of warm clothing for the front—fur coats, felt boots and woollen socks. Several truckloads were collected in the area, and Ikhil Rak was chosen by the farmers to take them to the front. Shortly after the train of gifts had set off, the Birobidzhan newspaper published a telegram from Supreme Commander-in-Chief Stalin expressing his gratitude to the residents of the Jewish Autonomous Region for their contribution towards the common struggle against the enemy.

Few of those who arrived nearly half a century ago to cultivate land in the Amur basin are still alive today. But the work those first Jewish settlers began has been continued by their children and grandchildren.

...ALMOST FIFTY YEARS LATER

Today, the village of Valdgeim is the centre of a large collective farm called "Lenin's Legacy".

Many interesting entries are to be found in the old records kept in the farm's archives. About income, for example, which, during the early days, was 5,000 roubles a year—what today are the annual wages of a family with two workers. The farm's lands at present total more than 23,000 hectares, of which 3,700 hectares are arable land, the rest being meadowland, forests, grassland and watermeadows.

Owing to the favourable climate, the collective farm specializes in growing vegetables, while abundant pastureland makes dairyfarming particularly successful. Bees are kept and fruit and melons are grown for the farmers. The collective farm owns 120 tractors, 70 motor vehicles and 20 combine harvesters. The scale of its economy can be judged from the fact that the farm annually spends over a million roubles on building and allocates about 150,000 roubles for the farmers' social and cultural needs. The annual income is over four million roubles. A large mechanized grain store and glass houses for vegetables are being built on the outskirts of the farm. It has its own hospital, shops, kindergartens, and schools, a club for children and a sports stadium soon to be finished. In all of the four villages which go to make up the collective farm (Valdgeim,

Ptichnik, Zhelty Yar and Pronkino), there are up-to-date cultural centres and libraries containing 37,000 books in Russian and Yiddish.

Originally there were only simple wooden houses on the farm, whereas now the local brick factory has difficulty in meeting the demand of the building industry. Although the farmers are provided with adequate housing, homes are still being built, since 20-30 families of new settlers arrive each year.*

A new way of life has reached the Jewish village of Valdgeim, a Soviet way of life which in no way recalls that of the poor, miserable ghettos in the "Pale". You never pass in the village street an old Jew in a patched coat or an impoverished musician playing his fiddle for alms. On Saturdays a few old people take the bus to the town's synagogue. Young Jews, however, look on them with respectful surprise. But many national traditions are still alive. The interest in the violin has taken a new turn and many children from Jewish families now study the violin in the town music school. There are also new traditions in the village. For example, a wedding in "Lenin's Legacy" is celebrated by the whole farm and the administration set aside a considerable sum for this. In the course of the celebrations it is interesting to watch the Russians, Jews and Ukrainians dancing the traditional Jewish wedding dance together.

* The Russian edition of the Birobidzhan newspaper for 20th September, 1978, carried an announcement describing the terms extended to new settlers. It stated that travel for new settlers with their possessions and cattle is paid in full. They are provided with a flat or house with a plot of land and are issued a non-repayable loan of 10,000 roubles (approximately 15,000 dollars). In addition, they are exempt from agricultural taxes for eight years, and from housing rent for two years.

When welcoming new settlers, the collective farm chairman, Feliks Glikshtein, likes to show them a yellowing certificate kept in the farm museum and written in Yiddish and Russian. It is called the "Government statement on the use of land" and includes the following, "The Executive Committee of the Soviets of the Jewish Autonomous Region allocates 9,655 hectares of land to the collective farm for its permanent use, in perpetuity." Over the forty-five years the farm lands have more than doubled in size. During sowing or harvesting the collective farm chairman covers between 200-300 kilometres a day by car. "We need more people," he says. "We have enough land for Jews, Russians and Byelorussians."

A HAMMER AS WELL AS A SICKLE

In the Jewish Autonomous Region Grigory Berovich is jokingly called the "Rothschild of Birobidzhan", although he does not own any capital or estate. The fact is that Grigory Berovich is the manager of the Regional division of the USSR State Bank.

Berovich looks like a typical office employee—a real "white collar worker", and possesses the calm and self-assurance of a man who knows his true worth. Indeed, nothing in his appearance or speech shows that the man in front of you was once a poor Jewish lad from a peasant family. He was born on a Jewish collective farm in the Crimea. His father was practically illiterate and cherished the hope that Grisha would receive a reasonable education, seven years of schooling being the limits of his dream. For the pre-war years that was, in fact, not bad. The young Berovich, however, completed ten years at



Two local papers are published in the Jewish Autonomous Region — the **Birobidzhaner Stern** in Yiddish, and the **Birobidzhanskaya Zvezda** in Russian. The former is popular outside the USSR and has subscribers in 30 different countries.

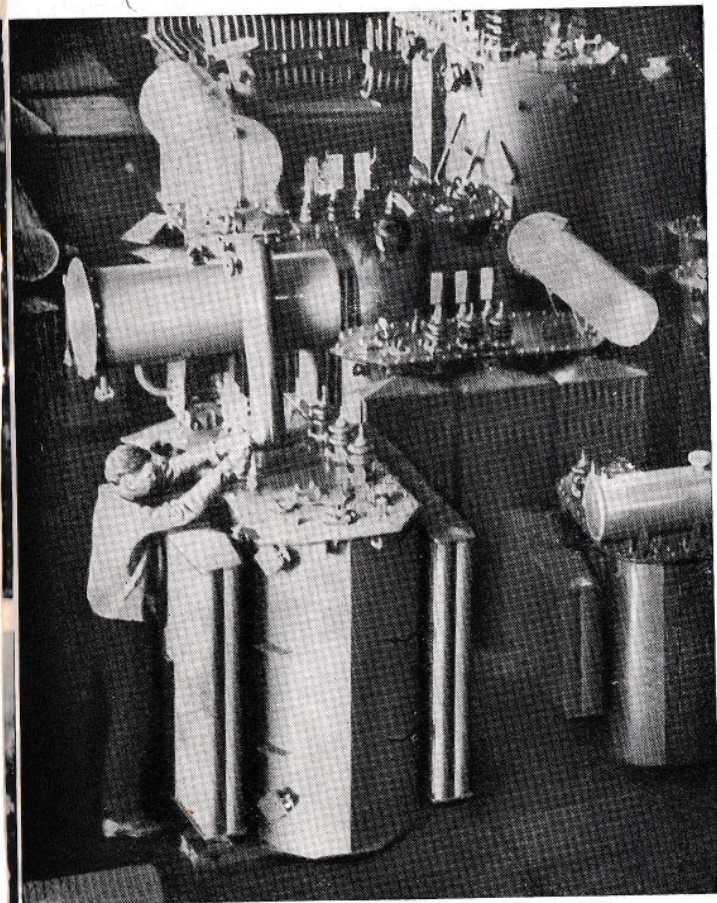
"We have in the USSR a national home in which, over the past forty-five years, we have built everything—plants, factories, housing, schools and theatres."

Lev SHAPIRO, First Secretary of the
Regional Committee of the CPSU

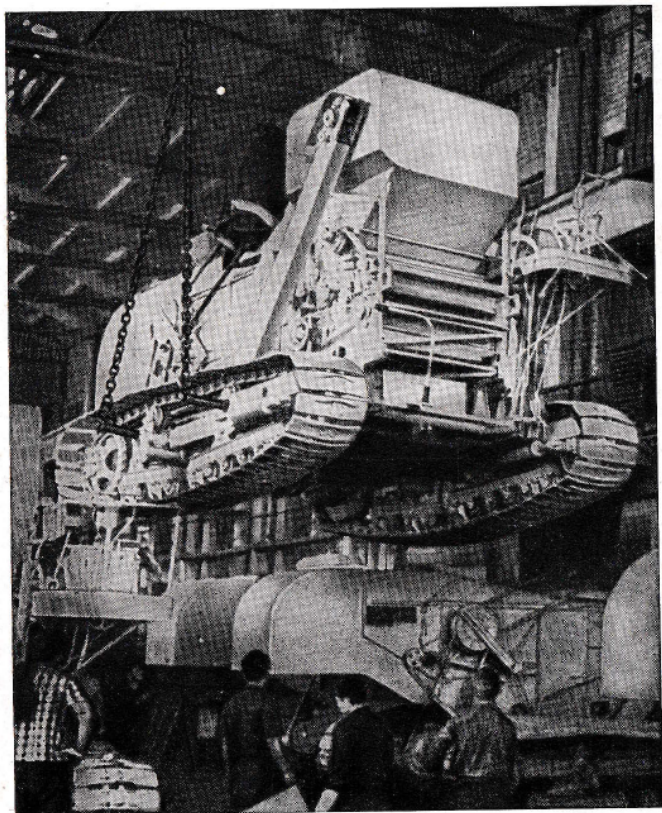


Fish-farm on lake Teploye (above).

Before harvest on the "Lenin's Legacy" collective farm.

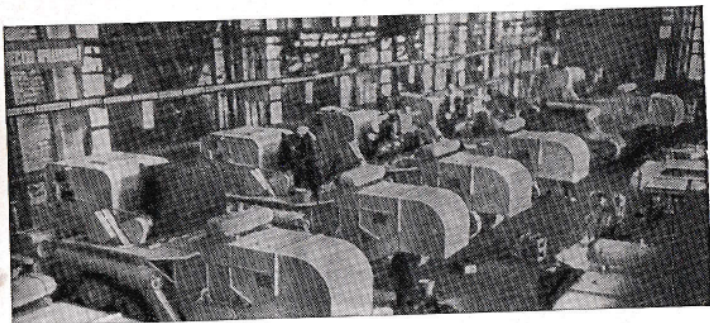


The Birobidzhan power transformer plant.



The "Dalselmash" plant in Birobidzhan exports caterpillar tread grain harvesters and ensilage combines to 14 different countries.

In the plant canteen.





Birobidzhan is a light industry centre in the Soviet Far East. An experienced worker at the Birobidzhan clothes factory, Khaja Karasik (right), is seen talking to a correspondent of the "Birobidzhaner Stern", Faina Pasmanik.

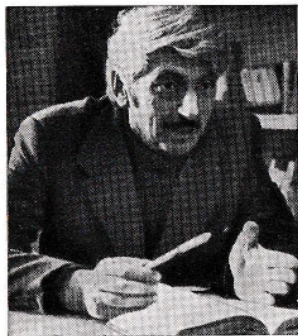




The main city of the Jewish Autonomous Region, Biro-bidzhan, is rapidly being built up. "We construct about 45,000 square metres of new housing each year. Many projects are designed for us specially by architects in Leningrad, Omsk and other cities in the Soviet Union," said Mark Kaufman, deputy chairman of the Regional Soviet of People's Deputies.



In the Region's 200 libraries there is a wide selection of Soviet and classical Jewish authors, including Lev Perets, Sholom Aleikhem, and Mendele Moikher Sforim. They are published in Yiddish and as translations in Russian and in other languages of the Soviet Union.



The Soviet Jewish writer Roman Shaikhet.



The production of Sholom Aleikhem's "Tevye the Milkman", directed by chief producer Berta Shtilman, has been running for years in the Jewish National Music Theatre.



The Birobidzhan dance group "Youth".





Members of the
mathematic circle
in a Birobidzhan
secondary school.



Over 300 children
attend the regional
chess school.



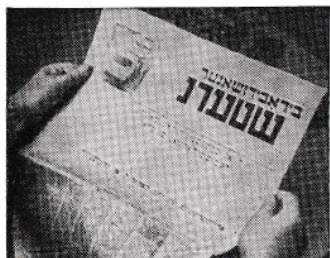
Young artists at the Birobidzhan Pioneers' Palace.



Nature is bountiful in the Jewish Autonomous Region, and there is a rich diversity of animal and plant life. Roe, tiger,



fox and squirrel are found in the forests, and lotuses are found on some lakes.



school and, showing ability in mathematics, entered the Kharkov polytechnic. A few days after Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union and the Great Patriotic War started (1941-45), he cut short his studies and left for the front. During the war he fought on the Volkhov front, took part in the breach of the blockade of Leningrad and was twice wounded.

After the war the Crimea was left in ruins. Berovich's parents had still lived in evacuation when they learnt that the Germans had burnt their house and destroyed their orchard. His father knew many people who had gone to Birobidzhan and who wrote inviting him there. In 1948, the Berovich family moved to the Jewish Autonomous Region. The whole family went: old men, aunts, sisters, children and even distant relatives. They have now been living there for over thirty years. Grigory's parents settled down on the collective farm, while he started work in the bank. After he had finished the Moscow Institute of Finance and Economics, he received fairly rapid promotion and now holds the most important position in the bank. He finds, however, as everyone probably does, that there is a "but" in his life, and this is his separation from his children. His son finished the Khabarovsk polytechnic and became a military constructor. His daughter studied in the Novosibirsk conservatory and is now teaching in Krasnodar. Of course, now that a concert hall has opened in the city, Berovich believes she will return to Birobidzhan.

When I asked if many Jews work in industry, Grigory Berovich, who is very well acquainted with the economy of the Region, advised me to go to the power transformer plant in Birobidzhan.

"Ask for Zakhar Mendelson there. He'll tell you all you want to know," he advised me as we parted.

"Is he the director then?"

"No, the director's Kogan. Mendelson is an ordinary worker, but he knows as much about the factory as the director."

"How's that?"

"Because there are Mendelsons in every shop of the factory. There are over eighty of them in the city and nearly half of them work at the plant."

I only managed to talk with Zakhar Mendelson at his home. He's a dispatcher at the plant and is always far too busy to waste time in conversation.

The day before, a Sunday, he and his two brothers had been fishing and they treated me to a Jewish fish dish. Old Samuil Mendelson sat at the head of the table. Zakhar spoke to him in Yiddish and then translated for me. The old man recalled the early days at the plant: at first they had produced buckets and small articles of hardware, manufacturing each nail separately by hand. His account was scattered with the names of friends and acquaintances both dead and alive. The old man regarded the whole plant as one large Jewish family. Now there are over 2,000 workers there, but he knows almost all of them, although he only visits it on special occasions. Many who now hold major positions in the plant administration were still children when Samuil Mendelson arrived in Birobidzhan: Vladimir Guralnik is today chairman of the plant Trade Union Committee, Alexander Geltser is the secretary of the Party Committee and Rakhil Geller, who arrived at the plant as a young woman twenty years ago, is now a deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR and represents the Jewish Autonomous Region in the Soviet parliament.

"Why did I go to work at the plant?" Zakhar Mendelson said, shrugging his shoulders. "Everybody works at the plant—Russians, Ukrainians and Jews. In fact, Jews make up about 40 per cent of the workers. Can it be bad if you feel you're respected, if you don't have to be afraid of losing your job and if you can learn a skill within a few months of arriving straight from school without any experience at all? Can it be bad when the plant has a good canteen and a kindergarten for all the children? Or does the fact that I myself, my wife, my two brothers and their wives, all three daughters and their husbands work or have worked at the plant make me a crazy old man? Everybody at the plant knows us Mendelsons."

A WALK AROUND BIROBIDZHAN

Zakhar Mendelson's house was built with a loan from the plant and the City Soviet. When talking about his neighbours Zakhar furnished me with some facts, others I found out from the plant Trade Union Committee which, among other things, supervises the allocation of housing.

There are 120 flats at No. 22 Naberezhnaya street, a five-storey building with all modern amenities. The rent, depending on the number of rooms and the overall area, ranges from 10 to 25 roubles a month, that is, from 4 to 8 per cent of a worker's average monthly wage. Jews, Tatars, Ukrainians and Russians live there, including workers, doctors, teachers, office employees, pensioners, war invalids, two policemen and a hairdresser.

The building we have in mind is typical of the city's architecture. I can't say it's a masterpiece of

design. It is a fairly simple brick building designed to avoid unnecessary expenditure on some architectural whim. Anyone visiting Birobidzhan as a tourist may perhaps consider the architecture in the residential areas monotonous, although, to be fair, I should point out that the civic buildings—the theatres, cinemas, the sports stadium, department store and the new telephone exchange—are all built with imagination and taste. As members of the City Soviet (the administrative body of the city) told me, the unpretentious design of the residential areas can be explained by several different factors. The town is growing rapidly and, in order to meet demand, it is necessary to build approximately 45,000 square metres of housing per year. It should also be born in mind that the considerable number of wooden buildings still remaining from the city's early days should now be pulled down. In brief, there is much building to be done. The cement plant at Landoko and the building materials plant—one of the largest in the Far East—are working at full capacity and scarcely meet the growing demand of the building industry in the Region. Over the past three years, the rate of construction has increased by 25 per cent and, in the next two or three years, the Regional Soviet plans to build a new building materials plant at a cost of eight million roubles. In addition, there are some projects of all-Union significance. For example, the healing springs at the health resort "Kulduk" where it is proposed to open a children's sanatorium by 1980. The funds have been allocated from the budget of the Ministry of Health of the RSFSR. Basically, as the chairman of the City Soviet, Vasily Makhinin, told me, "Birobidzhan is suffering problems normal for a child developing at a very fast rate."

The local inhabitants of Birobidzhan told me that, over recent years, tower cranes have become a major feature of the urban landscape. A new housing estate is growing up on the left bank of the Bira. The future occupants of these well-designed flats will be 3,000 workers and their families from a heavy-duty vehicle plant shortly to be put into operation. The lower floors will house shops and a complex of service industries. In the centre of the estate a school, kindergartens and crèches, a library and a club are to be built.

A tower crane also stands by the Region's largest plant, "Dalselmash", which produces caterpillar combines. The plant is undergoing reconstruction and extension and fresh capacities are being installed.

It now supplies fourteen countries with grain harvester and ensilage combines. It sprang up from a small artel which in the 20's and 30's manufactured carts... The biography of "Dalselmash" is similar to that of many other local industrial enterprises.

The streets of Birobidzhan are wide, the new squares are spacious. The town is being built with an eye to the future. When the sports stadium was built to seat 14,000 (the total population of the city is only 70,000), many said that it was an unnecessary luxury for a city like Birobidzhan. There were and still are arguments in support of thrift—today, even at the most interesting sporting events the stadium is still not completely full. But that is, nevertheless, only for the present. The future was also taken into consideration when the city limits were defined in the major plan for the development of Birobidzhan (approved in 1975). The town is allot-

ted 60,000 hectares—almost a hectare per person. Birobidzhan is a very green town, in fact, every street is a tree-lined boulevard.

LEV SHAPIRO

My first visit to the Jewish Autonomous Region was drawing to a close when my new friends—journalists for the *Birobidzhaner Stern*—suggested a tempting journey. They proposed a trip into the depths of the Hingan Massif to the source of the Bira to what is probably the only factory of its kind, the Teplorechensky fish-farm which specializes in breeding the famous Siberian salmon. For three years the salmon migrate about the vast Pacific, returning in the fourth year to spawn. Huge shoals swim fantastic distances across the Pacific, enter the mouth of the Amur and then jump the mountain rapids upstream to their original spawning ground. The fish-farm is situated on one of these grounds. Each autumn millions of spawn are laid in the incubation pools fed by crystal clear running water. Throughout the winter workers and scientists look after the developing spawn.

I met another interesting person at this amazing farm, the First Secretary of the Communist Party Regional Committee, Lev Shapiro. He was in the area meeting the electorate—he had been nominated as a deputy to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR (the Soviet parliament). *

After what I had seen of the Region I was left with a mass of fairly fragmentary impressions. I

* While the brochure went to press, elections to the USSR Supreme Soviet were held and Lev Shapiro was again elected deputy to the highest body of state authority in the Soviet Union. (Ed.)

consequently took advantage of this opportunity to ask the local Party leader a few questions.

Question: You could say the Jewish Autonomous Region has reached maturity: it was forty-five in May 1979. At that age it's good to take stock. Do you think that the opportunity afforded the Jews in 1934 of realizing their right to national autonomy has brought the desired results?

Answer: I shan't go into details. The main thing is that we have created a national home, which had been the dream of Jews for generations. Over the past forty-five years we have built everything out of nothing: plants, factories, housing, schools and theatres. Industry began with an artel manufacturing carts. Today it is a powerful plant which produces caterpillar combines exported to many countries of the world. There are now more than fifty industrial enterprises in the Region, and Birobidzhan has become the centre of light industry in the Soviet Far East. Much is being done to improve the standard of living of the people. Every year we build an average of 3,500 flats with all modern amenities. The wages of workers and office employees have risen, and they are now above the national average here. We are a long way from Moscow, but we receive programmes from the Central Television and Inter-
vision networks clearly. At the moment we are building a new radiotransmission link costing three million roubles. This will make it possible for people living in the most distant parts of the Region to watch live colour transmissions of the 1980 Olympic Games.

Question: What are the sources of friendship among the multinational population of the Jewish Autonomous Region?

Answer: I was asked the same question recently in America, although it was worded differently: how do you manage to maintain compatibility and good relations among people of twenty different nationalities living within a comparatively small region? I shall now repeat the explanation I gave then—that we do not need to “maintain” anything artificially. The roots of unity are in the very structure of Soviet society, in the absence of private property and of the division of people into rich and poor, and in the equality of all citizens of all nationalities. In brief, there is no food here on which national prejudices can feed. Moreover, the internationalism of the Soviet people follows naturally, I believe, from the Soviet government’s national and social policy. People who have found spiritual freedom and have been given a rich territory naturally aspire towards brotherhood and peace rather than towards discord.

Question: Although, as you say, there are almost twenty different nationalities living here, it is nevertheless a Jewish Autonomy. What is done to preserve and develop Jewish culture?

Answer: You have touched on a very interesting question connected with what I was just talking about, with the relations between nationalities. In the Region there are indeed favourable conditions in which national Jewish culture and creative endeavours can develop. We have two Jewish theatres, one professional and one amateur, which stage works of both classical and modern Jewish writers. There are Jewish dance ensembles and choirs, radio broadcasting in Yiddish, and a daily paper printed in Yiddish. There is, however, one thing I should like to draw your attention to: neither the Jews, the Russians, or the Ukrainians living in the Region want to shut themselves off from the other nationalities.

Interest in each other’s culture is extremely keen. We have, for example, Russian actors belonging to the Jewish theatre who act in productions in Yiddish. At the same time, there are many Jewish actors in the Russian theatre. It is not unusual to find Russians in the towns and villages who speak perfect Yiddish. One more example: the stage set for the first Jewish opera which was recently produced in Birobidzhan, “A Black Bridle for a White Filly”, was designed by the famous Soviet artist Ilya Glazunov who came specially from Moscow. A concert hall has opened only recently, and I have no doubt that this will have positive results in the development of national music.

When walking around the city you probably noticed in the shops the large number of books in Yiddish. Of course, most of the libraries have both Yiddish and Russian books.

The mutual influence and penetration of cultures—now being studied by UNESCO—can be observed in the everyday life of our Region. Incidentally, this is promoted by the growing number of mixed marriages.

At meetings of the Birobidzhan literary club our Jewish and Russian poets argue about their work. They are not concerned with questions of national discord—because there is no such discord.

To summarize, I can say that the Jewish Autonomous Region has become one of the major centres of Jewish culture in the country, a place where the ancient dream of the Jews to have land and to work on it has been realized. The creation of a Jewish autonomous region has made it possible for the Jews to have a national home which they can come to at any time or leave, if they like, and go to any part of the Soviet Union. The unhappy memory of

the "Jewish Pale", created for the Jews by the tsar's administration, has become a distant recollection. Reading about the "Jewish Pale" at school, our children frequently ask what it was. We of the older generation are happy that they do not know. For our children the Jewish Autonomous Region is a part of a large, single homeland—the Soviet Union.

Question: How do you see the Jewish Autonomous Region at fifty-five years from now?

Answer: Our region is actively involved in the rapid development of the Far East. The Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM), a railway built by the combined efforts of the whole country, opens up new opportunities. By providing those building BAM with agricultural products, we receive valuable help for development. At present we are building a large servicing plant for heavy-duty vehicles used in the construction, we are expanding our heat-and-power station, and are increasing vegetable production. I cannot say that this development does not create difficult problems at times, a lack of manpower being one of the most pressing. That is why we continue our policy of actively inviting new settlers. We have much space, and nature here is rich. Many Jews nevertheless have an impression that the Far East is at the end of the earth. And as long as this notion persists, we have to create supplementary incentives for settlers. Consequently, it is easier to obtain comfortable accommodation here than in the European part of the Russian Federation, wages are higher and particularly favourable career opportunities are offered the young. Over the last three years the number of places in kindergartens and schools has increased by 25 per cent. We have made a significant increase in health expenditure: in 1975 the

annual outlay was 165,000 roubles; today it is one million.

We look to the future with optimism. The French writer Antoine de Saint Exupéry writes in his book "Terre des hommes", "...love does not consist in gazing at each other but in looking outward together in the same direction." These words are relevant to our Region: we respect each other and look out together with optimism into the future.

Vyacheslav Kostikov
The People and Land of Birobidzhan

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**The People and
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The Jewish Autonomous Region lies in the southern part of the Soviet Far East along the River Amur. The first Jewish settlers arrived there in the late 1920s. In 1934 the national administrative unit of the Jewish people—the Jewish Autonomous Region—was set up in an area bigger than Belgium. This booklet will tell you about the past and present of this land, about its achievements and problems.

